



# **A cultural arts center for downtown Chula Vista?**

*The San Diego Union - Tribune; San Diego, Calif.*

*Jan 3, 2002; Mary Salas*

*Copyright SAN DIEGO UNION TRIBUNE PUBLISHING COMPANY Jan 3, 2002*

Strong leadership within Chula Vista's Downtown Business Association has built excitement for the area through new restaurants and a successful weekly farmers market. Redevelopment of a key corner across from City Hall into a new, modern police station -- complete with a community meeting area -- also will spur interest in downtown.

What is still needed, however, is a cultural draw to bring even more people from throughout the region to downtown Chula Vista. A new cultural arts facility would be just the ticket.

In the next couple weeks, the Chula Vista City Council will take an important step toward implementing a vision for downtown Chula Vista as the business, entertainment, civic and cultural focal points of the city. What better way of kicking off that vision than with a vibrant center for the arts?

Cities across the country have seen the value of creating venues for entertainment and culture that serve as an anchor for future development. Just up the state, the city of Merced created a partnership that renovated an old, abandoned department store into a three-story arts center that houses five free galleries of rotating exhibits; a studio theater; dance studios and classrooms that are busy every afternoon and evening with an array of classes.

Even in our own back yard, we have seen the success San Diego has enjoyed with the revitalization of the Gaslamp area into an energetic -- and lucrative -- tourist destination.

The time is right for cultural redevelopment in downtown Chula Vista. Local performance groups have been very successful in building their programs, and they need space to showcase their students' talents.

This potential is also seen by performance establishments outside the city. The San Diego Junior Theatre -- an organization with a rich 50-year history -- has expressed interest in opening a satellite studio and theater in Chula Vista.

Downtown currently has the capacity to create beauty out of blight. Vacant storefronts can become new performance venues that draw residents from throughout Chula Vista -- creating unity without our community.

Beyond newly transformed structures, Chula Vista also could finally realize the full potential of the Memorial Bowl. One day the city could be the proud home of a Shakespeare in the Park festival, in addition to its current Music in the Park series.

In addition to helping transform a vital section of our city, public support of the cultural arts makes fiscal sense. Established arts venues attract new businesses and even spur the development of downtown housing developments.

Fannie Mae and the Brookings Institution analyzed census data and found that downtown growth increased even in cities where overall population had decreased. New businesses looking to relocate to a community

many times look for cities with thriving cultural facilities to give their executives and employees access to serving on cultural boards.

In the city of Merced, the department store conversion project spurred the rehabilitation of a neighboring vacant building for the Merced County Association of Realtors, and a bank relocated its corporate headquarters in the next block.

For this rebirth to be successful, however, the city must take responsibility for its cultural development. We must do more than outline a vision for downtown as the business, entertainment, civic and cultural focal point of the city. We must find ways to make it happen.

Credit: Salas is a member of the Chula Vista City Council.